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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE: NO H1N1 CASES; NO MORE VISA REQUIREMENTS FOR
MEXICAN CITIZENS

REF: SINGAPORE 420

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: There are no confirmed cases of H1N1 influenza in Singapore and the Ministry of Health (MOH) lowered its alert level from orange to yellow on May 11. The GOS lifted its visa requirement for Mexican citizens on May 12, but seven-day quarantine requirements for people with recent travel to Mexico will continue. Thermal scanning and contact tracing at offices, schools and other public venues have eased, but screening will continue at all land, sea and air border checkpoints for the foreseeable future. The MOH will review "lessons learned" from the heightened alert period to address gaps in Singapore's pandemic preparedness. Health Minister KHAW Boon Wan has sought to calm fears about H1N1 by urging Singaporeans to focus on the severity of the disease and not the rate at which it is spreading, emphasizing that most infected people have recovered without hospitalization. The Singapore economy has been especially hard-hit by the global economic downturn, making it difficult to assess whether the H1N1 outbreak and orange alert had any direct effect on travel and tourism. The Embassy has sent an updated warden message on the lower alert level. End Summary.

Still No H1N1 Cases; Checkpoint Screening Continues

2. (U) There are still no confirmed cases of H1N1 Influenza A in Singapore. To date, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has investigated 34 suspected cases, and of those, 28 tested negative for Influenza A and six tested positive for typical seasonal flu. MOH lowered its alert level from orange to yellow on May 11. The GOS will continue to conduct thermal scanning of people arriving at all land, air and sea checkpoints (reftel), but scanning and contact tracing at offices, schools and other public venues have eased.

Visa Requirements Lifted; Quarantines Remain

3. (SBU) On May 12 Singapore lifted its visa requirement for Mexican citizens, but mandatory seven-day quarantines remain for

travelers that visited Mexico within seven days of their arrival in Singapore (reftel). Singapore instituted the visa requirement because Mexico was clearly the index country where most cases of H1N1 originated, Alvin Low, an MFA consular officer, told Econoff May 13. Singapore does not have an embassy in Mexico, but applicants were able to file for visas with the Honorary Consul-General in Mexico, through their employers, or at a Singapore embassy near them. Low said that several visa applications were filed and visas were issued to Mexicans. There were no special health-reporting requirements added to application forms to specifically address H1N1, so it was not clear how the GOS linked the visa requirement to its pandemic response except to alert the GOS to the travel plans of a Mexican citizen. Low did not know whether Singapore would implement visa requirements in future pandemic preparedness planning and response.

MOH Reviewing Lessons Learned

¶4. (U) Health Minister KHAU Boon Wan said in a May 12 press conference that MOH would use the next several weeks to review "lessons learned" from the heightened alert period and address gaps in Singapore's pandemic preparedness planning. Following the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, Singapore focused on improving the response capabilities of hospitals, Khaw said. However, the outbreak of H1N1 revealed that primary care and family physicians were ill-prepared to go to the orange alert level because they had not stocked enough essential supplies, such as masks and gowns (reftel). Khaw encouraged physicians to stock up on personal protective equipment while Singapore remains at yellow alert. Singapore plans in the next few

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months to send health experts and scientists to the United States, Mexico and Canada to review how H1N1 affected countries responded to the outbreak.

Khaw: No Need for Panic, but Be Prepared

¶5. (U) Minister Khaw also used the press conference to try to calm fears about the H1N1 outbreak, emphasizing that most people infected with the virus recovered without hospitalization. He encouraged Singaporeans to focus on the severity of H1N1, which in most cases appears to be no worse than seasonal flu, and not on the rate at which the disease is spreading. Singapore cannot keep H1N1 outside its borders indefinitely, but MOH will use containment measures to mitigate the spread of the disease once a case is identified, Khaw stated. For example, if a student is found to have contracted H1N1, that student, and perhaps very close contacts of the student, could be quarantined. Other students and teachers would be screened for the disease, but MOH would not plan to close or quarantine the entire school. Khaw encouraged the private sector to prepare for a pandemic by updating their business continuity plans.

Potential Economic Impact of a Pandemic

¶6. (SBU) Although no cases of H1N1 flu have been discovered in Singapore, local economists have examined past economic shocks to calculate the potential costs should the flu become a full-blown pandemic. A Standard Chartered report found that economic impacts in health crises of this nature are typically brief, with a quick downturn as discretionary spending is hit and confidence suffers, deterring travel and tourism. Analysts for United Overseas Bank (UOB) said the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak led to a seven-percent quarterly contraction in Singapore GDP as visitor arrivals fell by 64 percent and retail sales dropped 35 percent at the height of the crisis. There were at least two quarters of disruption in economic activities though the subsequent recovery was swift and no permanent damage was wrought on the overall health of the economies.

¶7. (SBU) Nomura Bank constructed a composite index of economic indicators in 94 countries and concluded that Singapore and Hong Kong were the most exposed economies to an influenza pandemic (nine

of the top twenty highly exposed were in Asia). The early discovery and disclosure of H1N1 (unlike with SARS) and the relatively high level of preparedness suggest that economic damage from an H1N1 pandemic would be relatively limited. However, with the Singapore economy already suffering from the effects of the global financial crisis, any economic impact from an influenza pandemic would squeeze already constricted manufacturing and tourism sectors. Recovery might not be as swift as in 2003.

18. (SBU) The economic downturn has clouded the effect the H1N1 outbreak and the orange alert level have had on air traffic, Eileen Poh, a Director in the Regulatory and International Group at the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS), told Econoff May 12. Arrivals appear to be steady, despite screening instituted at checkpoints. There are no direct flights from Singapore to Mexico, so Poh did not anticipate a substantial drop in departures, though she acknowledged that many Singaporeans postponed or canceled travel to the United States. With overall air carrier capacity down as a result of the economy, Poh said it would be difficult to determine whether traffic has slowed further as a result of H1N1 fears. CAAS will not report May traffic numbers until late June.

Updated Warden Message Sent

19. (U) The Embassy has sent a new warden message updating the
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American community on Singapore's move from orange to yellow alert.

SHIELDS